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Retirement Has Its Appeal

Lawyers Form Group to Offer Legal Aid to Indigent Clients

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It started out as one of those talks people have at the end of a summer day.

Two years ago, former Middlesex County Judge Edward Ginsburg and his cousin were sitting by the edge of a pond in New Hampshire, discussing his approaching 70th birthday.

"I don't believe in retirement. I don't like that term," said Ginsburg, recalling that day's conversation. Having reached the court system's mandatory retirement age, the lifelong Newton resident left the courtroom. But he has taken on another full-time venture - turning into reality a vision he and his cousin had on that summer day.

Senior Partners for Justice is less than four months old, but already Ginsburg has some of the city's top lawyers working for some of the region's poorest clients. The lawyers provide expert legal service for indigent people who need help with divorces, custody battles, and other family law matters. One case has already been settled; 13 others are in the works.

The initiative is his response to a pattern he noticed during his 25 years as a family court judge.

"There's a disconnect between lawyers and the people who need their services. Sixty-five percent of the people in probate court appear without lawyers because they can't afford them.

"I have a friend who says that going into court without a lawyer is like going to a foreign country without a guide. Sometimes the people who represent themselves don't even know the significant facts of their case.

"This is an effort to do something about that, while giving older, retired lawyers a chance to stay active," he said. "It helps the courts by giving them attorneys to argue the cases, too."

So far, Ginsburg, who works out of an office on Longfellow Place in Boston, has recruited 30 lawyers, including a 91-year-old lawyer from Cape Cod, a retired judge, and an expert on dividing pensions after a divorce.

Former Newton mayor Thomas B. Concannon has signed on, along with lawyers from Lowell, Andover, Weston, and Wayland.

Retired judge Herbert Hershfang just settled the group's first case, a divorce.

"It wasn't complicated," Hershfang said of the case. But he supports the cause, partly because as a judge at Boston Municipal Court and other courtrooms, Hershfang witnessed firsthand how many people can't afford lawyers.

"Judge Ginsburg is to be commended for filling a really important need in our court system," Hershfang said. "He had done a wonderful job as a judge, and then as soon as he leaves, he fills this need."

To Ginsburg, it's just the right idea, at the right time.

"I think it's Voltaire who said, 'There's nothing more powerful than an idea that has come of age.'

"Everything just fell into place, and I thought, 'I've got to seize the opportunity and run with it,' " said Ginsburg, who names former President Jimmy Carter as a role model.

"Most presidents retired, and what happened to them? They fade away, but I think [Carter] had more influence after his presidency."

The participating lawyers say Ginsburg, a diehard Red Sox fan known for his trademark bow ties, is tough to turn down.

Concannon, who at 63 is still practicing full time, said he couldn't say no to Ginsburg, a longtime friend.

"He fished me in," Concannon said, adding, "People need lawyers, and there's a growing amount of poor that need pro bono services."

The Volunteer Lawyers Project of the Boston Bar Association supplies the clients. That group's executive director, Meg Connolly, said all the cases are screened first, to make sure they have legal merit and that the client meets federal poverty guidelines. That means that an individual can't earn more than \$11,075 a year, and that a family of four may not earn more than \$33,938, she said.

Connolly said her program has been working to provide free legal services for 25 years, and the demand isn't abating.

Having someone like Ginsburg working on the same problem helps out.

"He has the cachet of being a long-standing family court judge, and lots of people like him," she said.

Ginsburg has a lifetime of connections to tap, "and he's an expert tapper," said Jack

Reilly, executive director of Massachusetts Continuing Legal Education Inc.

The agency hosts training seminars the first Wednesday of each month to keep the group's members up to date on marital law and family court issues.

Reilly said he has been stunned at the number of people who have been showing up.

"For a lot of people in the legal services, the initial reaction [to the program] was: 'Been there, done that; doesn't work.'

"But based on the force of [Ginsburg's] personality, and that he's at the office every day, he's gotten some very senior people on board," Reilly said. "You don't realize you want to do this until he talks to you."

The lawyers who are participating, Reilly said, "still want to have an intellectual experience, and they want to be part of the legal community.

"And," he said, "I'm sure their spouses are delighted to push them out of the house the first Wednesday of every month."

For more information, call Senior Partners for Justice at 617-523-5600 or e-mail Senior Lawyers @aol.com.